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SF PERUSALS

I Bet Your Life

A Comedy in Two Acts

Fred Charmichael

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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CHARACTERS

STACY KINGSLEY
GREGORY LARSON
MATTHEW STODDARD
LAURA PUDNEY
GERTA
BURTON FINLEY
HENRIETTA SQUIRES
IRA WATSON

TIME AND PLACE

The action of the play takes place in the living room of a New England house. The time is the present.

ACT I

Early evening in mid-summer.

ACT II

A short time later.

I BET YOUR LIFE

ACT I

SETTING: The living room of a modern house set in New England. U.C. there is a stairway leading L. to the upstairs, to the R. down a passageway and offstage is the front door. U.R. there is a closet with the door opening to the R. On the R. wall there is a pair of French doors opening on stage. This leads to a terrace, the main part of it being off stage D.R. . D.L. there is an archway to a dining room and presumably a kitchen beyond. There is a desk above this arch with a chair to the L. of it and a bench along its right side. C. there is a armchair with a small table to its L., a sofa is on S.R.. The room is obviously done in very good taste and reflects affluence but it does not have a lived-in look. The walls are pastel and the overall effect is light, airy, and comfortable. At the rise, the French doors are closed and the stage is dark except for some fading sun or early moonlight coming in through the doors.

At RISE: The front door is open which sends a shaft of LIGHT onto the upstage area. STACY KINGSLEY comes in U.C. She is an attractive secretary probably in her late twenties, vivacious with a good sense of humor. She carries a purse and an attaché case.

STACY. (*Calls Back)* Come on in..

GREG. (*Off stage outside.*) Is it dangerous?

STACY. Between the car and the front door I saw one moose and two mountain lions.

GREG. (*Off stage.*) You kid?

STACY. Yes, I kid. Make a dash for it.

GREG. (*Off stage.*) It's too dark in there.

STACY. I'm trying to find a light switch. (*she finds a bank of switches on the upstage wall and flips one which LIGHTS the room.*) There, come to the light of your life.

GREG. (*Off stage.*) Is that you?

STACY. Come and find out. (*Crosses into room.*) Say, this is really nice. You'll like it.

GREG. (*Off stage.*) It's still dark there.

STACY. (*She flips another switch and obvious outside LIGHTS illuminate out where the front door is and also the terrace area.*) How's that? Watch out for bears.

GREG. (*Off stage.*) Bears sleep at night. (*STACY gives a small wicked laugh. .*) Don't they?

STACY. (*Crosses to L. of desk.*) Get in here or I'll lock the door.

GREG. (*Off stage.*) No, don't (*GREG LARSON comes in carrying two suitcase. He leans against the closet wall.)*

(*GREG is in his thirties or so and is an astute businessman but also has a rather timid streak at times which almost overcomes his sense of humor. He puts the bags down..)* I should fire you.

STACY. (*Purse and briefcase on desk .*) You can't. I run the office.

GREG. I hate the country.

STACY. Surprise. Surprise.

GREG. Damn Matthew Stoddard.

STACY. (*Goes D.L.*) Matt is your best friend.

GREG. I need a new one.

STACY. .Just look around you. It is wonderful. It is beautiful. (*Flicks light switch by dining room and LIGHTS go on O.L..*) There's a dining room through here and probably a kitchen..

GREG. (*Comes down into the room.*) Can you send out for Chinese in the country?

STACY. (*Goes into dining room.*) That is a gorgeous breakfront and look at those Hitchcock chairs and that bay window. What a view.

GREG. (*D.L.*) It is night. You can't see the view.

STACY. (*Reenters.*) But I know it is beautiful. Mountains and valleys and all those trees.

GREG. A heaven for dogs.

STACY. (*To foot of stairs.*) What do you suppose is upstairs?

GREG. I bet it's gone.

STACY. What?

GREG. The upstairs. I've heard porcupines eat houses in New England.

STACY. (*Flips another switch and LIGHTS go on upstairs*) See, even electricity up here. (*Goes upstairs.*)

GREG. I'm glad Tommy Edison didn't stay in New Jersey.

STACY. (*Off stage.*) This is great. One - two- three -

GREG. (*At foot of stairs.*) What are you counting, raccoon corpses?

STACY. (*Off stage.*) Bedrooms. There are four of them.

GREG. And a bathroom? Tell me there is a bathroom. I will not go outside to -

STACY. (*Off stage.*) There are two bathrooms and the water runs.

GREG. Faucets or pumps?

STACY. (*Comes downstairs.*) Chromium faucets. I think Matt has made a real find.

GREG. Then where is he?

STACY. He'll be here. He said tonight is the wager of a lifetime.

GREG. He'd better show up. You don't have a chaperone.

STACY. I'm probably the only secretary off for a weekend whose boss is not going to make a pass at her.

GREG. You never know.

STACY. (*Goes and opens French windows.*) Yes, I do. You promised my mother.

GREG. She told you?

STACY. I'm only kidding.

GREG. So am I.

STACY. This is great. There's a neat terrace out here, chairs, tables -

GREG. (*Moves down.*) chipmunks, skunks -

STACY. Now, Greg.

GREG. Shouldn't you say Mr. Larson?

STACY. We're not at the office. I call you Greg at dinner, at the theatres, in taxis.

GREG. But we're in the country.

STACY. I'm sure it's most informal.

GREG. Like "How's the milkin', Clem?" or "Dipped any candles lately, Marthy?", that sort of thing?

STACY. You got it. (*Goes to the closet.*)

GREG. Why does Matt have to have this big mystery contest here? Why can't he make the bet in the city?

STACY.(*Looks in the closet.*) This is fun.

GREG. (*Sits on the bench.*) Yeah.

STACY. You know it is. You two love to make wagers. (*Goes to him.*) Didn't you bet him he wasn't good enough to appear at the Metropolitan Opera?

GREG. He cheated.

STACY. He won the bet. You should have seen your face when he walked on-stage carrying a spear.

GREG. But he didn't sing.

STACY. (*Goes above desk to the L..*) He appeared at the Met, that was the wager.

GREG. Semantics.

STACY. And what a prize, lunch anywhere he wanted.

GREG. Only Matt would pick that stupid little waterfront restaurant.

STACY. But in Bermuda.

GREG. A bet is a bet and the conch soup was to die for.

STACY. (*Glances at phone pad and looks in desk drawers.*) You see.

GREG. But what is the bet and why are we trapped amongst Mother Nature's goodies?

STACY. (*Pulls out phone book.*) He said we'd find out and I imagine we shall.

GREG. He's just mad because I wouldn't push his script to the studios.

STACY. I think it's very good.

GREG. That's because you like him. He is the best soap opera writer in the business but as to screenplays, no way. The entire premise is not possible.

STACY. I think it is.

GREG. You're not the agent.

STACY. And you're not the writer, Matt is.

GREG. But I know what will sell.

STACY. His script should be in Hollywood right now.

GREG. And my reputation would be down the drain and you would be standing on the unemployment line.

STACY. (*Picks up attaché case from desk and goes U.C.*) You're impossible. Let's get the bags upstairs. I hate clutter. (*Picks one up.*)

GREG. Don't leave me here alone.

STACY. (*Goes upstairs.*) Scared?

GREG. (*Picks up bag and follows her.*) It's the air. I can't breathe. I'm used to second hand smog.

(MATTHEW STODDARD appears at the windows. He is a contemporary of the others and perhaps more devil may care than GREG. He crosses to the stairs, looks up them, and howls like a wolf.)

GREG. (*Off stage.*) What was that? (*MATT goes into the closet.*)

STACY. (*Off stage.*) The Hound of the Baskervilles.

GREG. (*Comes downstairs.*) Shouldn't we call a Forest Ranger or a Mountie?

STACY. (*Comes downstairs.*) Canada is still one hundred and fifty miles that way. (*Points.*)

GREG. (*As MATT gives another howl from the closet.*) Good God, it's the ghost of Benedict Arnold.

STACY. (*Hides behind him.*) I'm scared.

GREG. You are not and I am not (*Loudly at the closet door.*) and you can come out now, Matthew Stoddard. (*Opens the door and crosses R. MATT is standing there.*)

MATT. No surprise, huh?

GREG. None. (*MATT closes door.*)

STACY. (*Goes down by the bench.*) And I acted so scared.

GREG. You deserve an Oscar.

STACY. Come on, Greg, you were a little nervous.

GREG. (*Goes to the windows.*) I am always nervous in the country, all those trees but the only green I admire is in my wallet. This is your idea, Matt. I came. I saw. I have conquered. Is this the end of the wager?

MATT. (*Goes below sofa.*) No, it's about my script.

GREG. You are my best friend and I -

MATT. And you are my best friend and I can still go to another agent.

GREG. You are under exclusive contract to me.

MATT. I'll break the contract.

GREG. I'll call F. Lee Bailey.

MATT. You wouldn't?

GREG. Tell him, Stacy.

STACY. He would.

MATT. I know you would.

GREG. Then let us not argue. (*Goes below him to C.*.) Let us go back to the city and spend a nice weekend at the Club which overlooks steel skyscrapers.

MATT. No, I conned you into coming up here for the biggest wager of our lives.

GREG. So what's the bet?

MATT. Let's get back to my screenplay.

GREG. Must we?

MATT. It hinges on that.

STACY. If I may interrupt -

GREG. Just once.

MATT. Only once.

STACY. (*Goes to MATT.*) I like your screenplay very much , Matt. It is exciting, suspenseful, and has a great twist ending.

MATT. Thank you, darling. Will you marry me?

STACY. Only if I don't have to sign a prenuptial agreement.

MATT. The offer is hereby withdrawn.

GREG. (*Goes to bench.*) If you two will stop trying to be witty and, oh, so Noel Coward, I would like to hear the rules of the bet.

MATT. (*Goes C. and STACY perches on the sofa arm.*) This house belongs to a friend of a friend of mine who, as we speak, is doing Europe.

GREG. I wish I were doing Time Square.

MATT. He rents this place out for weekends to friends and this is the perfect place for our wager.

STACY. (*Nods.*) Perfect.

GREG. Do you always have to agree with him?

STACY. I do when he is right.

MATT. Which is most of the time. To get back to my script -

GREG. I need a drink. There must be a bar. No friend of a friend of yours would have a house without a bar.

STACY. (*Rises and crosses in.*) There is one in the dining room. It is exquisite. It has a marbled top and is paneled -

GREG. Just get me a drink. You know what.

STACY. (*Goes D.L..*) Yes, sir. I obey. (*Turns in arch.*) But, starting now, I am on overtime. (*Exits.*)

MATT. She's so cute.

GREG. So is Miss Piggy but go on with the bet.

MATT. You think the premise of my script is all wrong, right?

GREG. Right. It is wrong. (*Sits on the bench.*) It's just implausible. A terminally ill man is too much of a chicken

to kill himself so he hires a hit man to do it and then he finds he was misdiagnosed but who is the hit man? Right?

MATT. (*Goes to the windows.*) More or less.

GREG. (*Crosses U.C..*) Matthew, you are very successful. You make a fortune. You are envied by every housewife who answers those "be an author" ads in the magazines. Why can't you stay where you are?

MATT. To stay where you are is to move backwards. Someone said that, Confucius or someone.

GREG. (*Goes L. of chair C..*) Probably Sidney Sheldon. Your script is just not a plausible idea.

STACY. (*Returns with a highball.*) This conversation has not progressed.

GREG. (*Takes the drink.*) I need that.

STACY. Matt?

MATT. Not till I start the bet.

GREG. (*Sits on the bench.*) Shoot.

MATT. That is precisely it. Shoot. That is the bet.

STACY. (*Sits on the desk chair.*) This is getting good.

GREG. What is the bet?

MATT. (*Crosses C..*) I bet you that my script is exceedingly plausible. I have hired a hit man to kill you and the bet is that you can't spot him before you are dead.

STACY. You are joking, aren't, you?

MATT. Nope.

GREG. (*Not believing him.*) And how did you find a hit man, advertise in the Wall Street Journal or look in the Yellow Pages under "H"?

MATT. I did what they do in those movies like the one I have written and which you do not believe in.

STACY. Touchè.

MATT. I put on my worst clothes and I went from one seedy bar to another.

GREG. Your usual typical evening.

MATT. Keep joking. You'll stop soon enough.

STACY. I think he's serious.

GREG. You're not?

MATT. I am.

GREG. He is.

STACY. This is like your script.

MATT. I kept staying I wanted to get in touch with someone who could do something for me. I put "something" in quotes and said it quietly and ominously.

GREG. And the first person you met said he would snuff me out for a few dollars, right?

MATT. Wrong.

STACY. Don't interrupt, Greg.

MATT. (*Crosses below sofa.*) I did my ominous bit in several bars and left my phone number and guess what?

GREG. Jimmy Hoffa called from the beyond?

MATT. (*Goes L. and to above sofa.*) I got only one call.

GREG. Did you tape it? That's the proof you're not kidding.

MATT. The proof is coming tonight.

STACY. Here?

MATT. I met this gentleman who called.

GREG. This alleged man you hired to kill me is a gentleman?

MATT. (*Crosses down.*) I must say my script cast the big boss all wrong.

GREG. You admit you were wrong?

MATT. He fit in perfectly in the Oak Room at the Plaza. He looked like any corporate executive. I felt if I were buying controlling interest in General Motors.

STACY. Just my type. Is he married?

MATT. I didn't ask. I don't even know his name other than Mr. B.

GREG. Mr. B.? Well, you spin a good yarn.

MATT. I'm still spinning. He asked me what sort of killing I wanted.

STACY. You have a choice?

MATT. (*Goes above desk.*) It's like being in a Chinese restaurant. I could choose from columns 1, 2, or 3 and so on.

STACY. Killings with or without MSG?

MATT. I told him my whole scheme and he was most intrigued.

GREG. So am I.

MATT. (*Crosses by bench.*) I said I had a friend -

GREG. Me?

MATT. You, and this friend is terminally ill but didn't have the courage to end it all so my friend asked me to arrange it for him.

GREG. As a birthday present?

MATT. I'm so fond of you that I picked the most expensive killing. It's very civilized. It's called "Death at a Party".

STACY. (*Rises.*) We're having a party tonight? Goody.

MATT. (*Goes above sofa..*) All I had to do was provide the setting. Mr. B. said he would provide the guests.

GREG. Straight from which detention center?

MATT. Some local guests and some not.

STACY. How democratic.

MATT. (*Goes R. of sofa.*) And when the party is at its height and my friend is happy the end will come. Bang.

STACY. (*Goes above desk.*) Matt, you'll lose not only a friend but a top agent.

MATT. Can't be helped but there is an out clause.

GREG. There had better be.

MATT. (*Crosses in.*) Naturally, Mr. B. is not the hit man. He's like a producer. He hires the cast.

GREG. And fires them?

MATT. If the bet is over by ten o'clock which, of course, it will be.

GREG. (*Rises, puts glass on small table, and goes to MATT.*) Let me get this straight. If I spot the hit man then I win and if I give up I tell you before ten o'clock -

MATT. And I call Mr. B. and stop the game.

STACY. And if you don't call him?

MATT. Then it's bang-bang.

GREG. (*Goes to windows.*) All this to prove your script is plausible? You must be desperate.

MATT. You have no idea. I have been writing that soap opera for years. This script should be a stepping stone to being a really recognized writer. I know it is good.

GREG. This is some wager.

MATT. Mr. B. said he will be - how did he put it? - in the vicinity in his limo with the cellular phone.

GREG. I suppose the license plate says H-I-T?

MATT. Actually it is very conceited, just two initials, M. and E.

GREG. Why can't he be the hit man?

MATT. He's an executive. He doesn't do the work himself. And if I know who he is -

STACY. (*Sits on bench.*) Or she. Remember in those mysteries it's always he or she.

MATT. If I know I'm sure I would give it away.

STACY. Well, when does the party begin? I wonder what a hit man looks like?

(LAURA PUDNEY appears at windows. She is of indeterminate age and very local and folksy, a real native. She carries two paper shopping bags loaded with food..)

LAURA. Here I am.

STACY. Good grief!

GREG. What do you want?

LAURA. To do my job.

GREG. You're it! (*To MATT.*) I won the bet. Let's go back to the city.

LAURA. You ain't leavin' till you eat. I'm here to cook supper.

STACY. Oh, of course, the party dinner.

LAURA, (*Indicating bags.*) Nope, supper. That's what these are full of.

STACY. Here, let me help you. (*Takes one of the bags from her.*)

LAURA. That's right friendly of you.

STACY. The men are too tired to move

LAURA. It's too hot for a roast and it's too late for a stew so I figured a nice cold supper.

STACY. Is that what was ordered?

LAURA. Employer said it was up to me.

GREG. (*Steps in.*) Who is the employer?

LAURA. Don't know. Stopped by the General Store and left some money for someone to cook supper tonight.

MATT. Nice try, Greg.

STACY. How many are expected?

LAURA. Oh, somewhere between six and eight. I have to be out of here by ten o'clock. I better get a move on. Where is the kitchen?

STACY. (*Crosses to arch D.L.*) Follow me.

GREG. You haven't worked here before?

LAURA. Not this place, no.

STACY. It's new to us but if you need any help just call and we'll figure it out between us.

LAURA. That's real nice of you. Oh, my name's Laura Pudney.

STACY. Laura? What a pretty name.

LAURA. It's from that song. My mother said I looked like a face what was passin' through on a train. (*Exits followed by STACY who gives a backwards glance.*)

GREG. (*Following them a few steps.*) She could be a hit man.

MATT. (*Sits on the sofa.*) She could be Amerlia Earhart.

GREG. Since she doesn't know the house, do you suppose she's one of Mr. B.'s people?

MATT. Possibly. Do you choose her? If you do and she is real and not the hit man then I win the bet.

GREG. Give me a little more time.

STACY. (*Reenters.*) I love her. She is right out of Central Casting.

GREG. (*Moves D.C..*) You really think so?

STACY. Either that or she was born and raised right here.

LAURA. (*In archway.*) You city folks allergic to anything?

GREG. Just guns.

STACY. He's joking. No, Laura, we eat anything.

LAURA. That's good because there ain't no choices. (*Starts to go but turns back.*) I should apologize for not bein' here sooner but there's a whole passle of police down the road..

GREG. What for, a shooting?

LAURA. Car wreck. Rescue squad and all is there. Took some folks off to the hospital. Shouldn't drive them big limousines on these roads. Too many curves.

MATT. (*Rises.*) A limousine?

LAURA. Yep, one of them long ones. Odd license plate, just two initials. M and E. (*Exits.*)

GREG. (*Goes U.C. to leave.*) That does it. The hit man's in the hospital. The bet if off.

MATT. No way. Mr. B. may be in the hospital but the hit man is on his way.

STACY. Or is here already.

GREG AND MATT. In the kitchen?

STACY. (*Sits on the bench.*) No, I would trust Laura Pudney.

MATT. That's what all those bank tellers said about Bonnie and Clyde.

GREG. (*Goes down to MATT.*) Isn't it time to return to the dangers of the city.?

MATT. Not possible. Mr. B. said he would make certain no one leaves till ten o'clock.

GREG. What does "make certain" mean?

MATT. It means someone is planted on this hill to make sure of the contract.

STACY. An understudy hit man?

GREG. (*Crosses down.*) Who might get his day.

MATT. I'm going down the hill and see what happened. (*Goes U.C.*)

STACY. But the understudy will kill you.

MATT. I'm safe. They have Polaroid's of me.

GREG. Lucky you.

MATT. Boy, I'm sure glad I'm not you. (*Exits.*)

GREG. He's my best friend.

STACY. (*Crosses C..*) He seems very worried.

GREG. (*Sits right of sofa.*) Then we're trapped.

STACY. No, you're trapped.

GREG. (*After a pause.*) I wish you'd say something.

STACY. Like what?

GREG. Like "let's get out of here." There must be some way.

STACY. (*Sits beside him.*) You wouldn't welch on a bet would you?

GREG. No - yes. Anyway, Matt is only kidding, isn't he? (*Pause.*) I'm sure he is. (*Pause.*) Aren't you sure? (*Pause.*) No, he is not kidding.

STACY. I knew you could answer yourself.

GREG. Maybe I should dress up in Laura Pudney's clothes and they'd never suspect. It always works in the movies.

STACY. You would leave that cook standing there in the kitchen naked?

GREG. She could wear a dish towel or a potholder or something.

STACY. And you'd leave me here alone with a killer on the prowl?

GREG. (*Rises and tries to pull her up.*) No you're coming with me.

STACY. And leave poor Matt holding the bag? No, sir.

GREG. (*Moves away R..*) You like him more than you do me. You always have

STACY. That is not the point.

GREG. It is the point. It has been the point for months. We both make plays for you and we both get nowhere.

STACY. What do you do, compare notes in the locker room?

GREG. If we did, we'd both lie so we never discuss you.

STACY. (*Leans back on the sofa with fake seduction.*) Why is it my curse to be this desirable creature?

GREG. (*Goes above sofa.*) You are right. Why didn't I hire someone from the senior center, someone with gray power?

STACY. And I could be secretary to some tottering old executive, marry him, poison him, and inherit his estate.

GREG. (*Goes C.*) You read too many scripts.

STACY. (*Rises.*) You know that I like you and Matt equally. You are both very nice but you are both a lot of talk.

GREG. (*Advances on her.*) Talk, am I? I'll show you talk, I'll show you -

GREG AND STACY. - my verbs and dangling participles, Mona.

STACY. (*Laughs.*) Mona?

GREG. I mean Stacy.

STACY. Caught you.

GREG. That was from Matt's soap last week, wasn't it?

STACY. I fought with him over that line and it still doesn't play well.

GREG. I was rather seductive though, wasn't I?

STACY. (*Pats his cheek.*) No, dear Greg, you were not. (*Moves away below sofa.*) I think we three should remain the best of friends as we are now.

GREG. (*Moves into her.*) Friends?

STACY. But I want you both to keep trying to be more. That's what makes this such a wonderful job.

MATT. (*Comes rushing in U.C.*) It's true. The wreck.

GREG. Did you see Mr. B.?

MATT. He was taken to the hospital.

STACY. Serious?

MATT. They said he was in shock, a temporary coma.

GREG. (*Crosses U.C..*) Then the bet is off. I'm leaving.

MATT. You can't. As long as he is in a coma we don't know who he hired for this job. Whoever the hit man -

STACY. - or woman -

MATT. Whatever. The hit person will act at ten o'clock.

GREG. It could be anyone.

MATT. (*Crosses below desk.*) It must be Laura.

STACY. (*Goes above sofa.*) Doubtful.

GREG. (*Crosses to MATT.*) She's the only stranger.

MATT. So far.

STACY. That's right, others are coming.

GREG. And one of them wants me dead.

(GERTA appears in the French windows. She is a very intense young woman wearing a long skirt, a loose shirt, sandals and has long hair. She is carrying a huge manuscript of a very long book which is well worn. She speaks and moves with great intensity.)

GERTA. (*Sweeps in below sofa.*) Which of you is Gregory Larson?

GREG. (*Crosses in pointing to MATT.*) He is.

MATT. I am not.

GERTA. (*Goes to him going below GREG and stares.*) No, you write that trash.

MATT. Yes, that's me, the trash writer.

GERTA. (*Turns to GREG.*) Then you are Mr. Larson?

GREG. There's no other man present.

GERTA. Then I have something for you.

STACY. (*Goes C.*) I don't like this.

GERTA. It's loaded.

MATT. Look out!

GREG. (*At the same time as he ducks behind chair C.*) Take cover!

GERTA. (*At the same time as she holds out the script.*) Here it is!

MATT. (*Grabs the book from her.*) Give me that!

GREG. It's a bomb!

GERTA. It certainly is not.

STACY. (*She has been calm and come below sofa.*) Hold it! Everyone desist! Shut up! (*They all stop and stare at her, GREG stands.*)

GERTA. (*Points at STACY.*) I know you.

STACY. And I know you.

MATT. Sorority sisters per chance?

GREG. (*Moves R. of chair C.*) I know when you open that the pages are cut out and there is a gun in there.

STACY. (*Crosses to MATT.*) Nonsense. (*Takes script from him.*) Give it to me.

MATT. Be careful.

GREG. Stacy, watch out.

STACY. (*Opens script.*) There. It is only the manuscript of a book. (*Hands it back to MATT.*)

GERTA. It is more than a manuscript. It is the survival of mankind as we know it.

GREG. You're an author?

GERTA. The Pulitzer, The Nobel will not change me.

MATT. Stay just as you are.

GERTA. You would know me if she would have let me see you.

STACY. This young woman, Gerta Something-or-other -

GERTA. Just Gerta. Last names are irrelevant.

STACY. Gerta Irrelevant has been coming by the office for the last week.

GERTA. I am pleased you are on the 31st floor. I belong to no fitness club. I walk those stairs for exercise.

GREG. Up and down?

MATT. Round trip?

GERTA. To bring you this I would climb Mount Everest barefoot.

MATT. What exactly is it other than a doorstop?

GERTA. It is a textbook for the future, outlining the mistakes of everyone from Jean Paul Sartre to Albert Einstein.

MATT. (*Hefting the script.*) They must have been powerful wrong.

GREG. (*Goes below GERTA to STACY.*) I am sure that Miss Kingsley here will see that we read it. Stacy, why have you not taken it before?

STACY. (*Takes script from MATT.*) I am very polite to young authors, aren't I, Ms. Gerta?

GERTA. Polite, yes. Helpful, no.

GREG. Of course I shall read it, shan't I, Stacy?

STACY. (*Hands script to him and goes to desk .*) Open it. Go ahead.

GREG. (*Opens the book.*) All right.

GERTA. You have just opened the answer to the question.

MATT. But he didn't ask a question.

GERTA. I mean the question, the one we all ask.

MATT. Oh, that question.

GREG. (*Tries to focus on the writing* .) What is this? Sanskrit?

GERTA. (*Goes to him.*) I write with a quill.

MATT. Plucked from your own head?

GERTA. (*Turns on him and crossed to him intensely.*) And you use a computer and pollute the environment when you write those daytime travesties. Your opinion is trash. Your scripts are trash.

MATT. You are quoting from the New York Times.

GREG. (*Hefting the book.*) You honestly wrote all this with a quill and a bottle of ink?

GERTA. It was good enough for Ludwig von Beethoven.

GREG. He wrote music.

MATT. He was deaf.

GERTA. My writing is music to the ears of those who understand.

STACY. (*Comes down between GERTA and GREG.*) There are ads for typists in all those "how-to-write-and-be-published" magazines so you call one of them and when it is typed neatly I am sure Mr. Larson will read it. (*Takes the script.*)

GERTA. No. (*Grabs it back. To GREG.*) We will experience it together. I will sit at your feet and read it aloud.

GREG. I'm rather busy this evening. I'm going to be shot.

GERTA. That is humor, I assume.

GREG. That is truth.

GERTA. (*Goes to the windows.*) I will wait outside. I will wait forever until you are ready. You have but to say, "The moment is now" and I shall appear. (*Exits.*)

MATT. Like Banquo's ghost?

GREG. (*STACY goes to the windows.*) Maybe she's a reincarnation of Houdini.

STACY. She is curling up under that tree. I think she is moaning.

MATT. I have been known to moan when I read my own writing. (*Sits on the bench.*)

STACY. If she's the hit person then this must be her first job.

GREG. (*Suddenly serious.*) Matthew.

MATT. (*Takes up his tone with a smile.*) Yes, Gregory.

STACY. Using full names, you are serious.

GREG. Time to stop this ridiculous charade. I can prove this whole evening is a joke.

MATT. You can?

GREG. Yes, I can.

MATT. How?

GREG. To hire a hit man must cost money and you didn't pay him, did you? (*Sits in chair C.*)

MATT. You're right, I didn't.

GREG. So there.

MATT. (*Rises.*) But you did.

GREG. I never -

STACY. Oh-oh.

GREG. Stacy, that "oh-oh" sounds very ominous.

STACY. (*Goes below sofa. To MATT.*) So that's why you wanted that check.

GREG. What check?

STACY. (*To GREG.*) I wouldn't have done that for anyone else, of course, but -

GREG. Done what?

STACY. He said it was for a joke and I know you play tricks on each other and - well - (*She runs out of steam.*) he is your best friend and - well -

GREG. The one you trust the least.

STACY. (*Moves away below sofa.*) Matt, help me before I'm fired.

MATT. I had to prove to this gentleman I was serious. I had to give him something more than a down payment.

GREG. You made a down payment on my death?

MATT. Just one thousand dollars.

GREG. With my own check?

MATT. No, with my own cash.

GREG. Then what check are you talking about?

MATT. He had to see me send off a legitimate check to a Swiss bank and I said I would give him the number of the account tonight at one minute after ten.

GREG. He swallowed that?

MATT. He said if the account number was wrong then I would wear cement Gucci's.

GREG. (*Rises and goes to STACY.*) How much was this check for?

STACY. You know how I give you all those checks to sign and you never really look at them closely and -

GREG. How much was it for?

STACY. - it was only for this bet and -

GREG. How much?

STACY. (*In a small voice.*) Fifty thousand. (*Sits.*)

GREG. Dollars?

MATT. It won't ever be cashed.

STACY. I put a stop payment on it right after I wrote it.

GREG. (*Turns to MATT.*) What about the cement Gucci's?

MATT. If we call it off before ten o'clock then I only have to make another small payment. Nothing to worry about.

GREG. (*Sits by STACY.*) As long as Mr. B. comes out of his coma quickly and calls off this person.

MATT. I've heard of some shock patients who couldn't communicate for months.

STACY. Isn't it exciting?

GREG. I do not believe someone is coming here tonight with the intention of killing me.

MATT. All you have to do is find him. This is a better prize than even that Bermuda trip. I bet your life.

STACY. And if you drop out of the game you lose.

MATT. But remember, when you decide my script is plausible we call off the hit person.

GREG. Unless I identify him first.

MATT. Right. (*Crosses above him to sofa.*) I hope you're having a good time. This took weeks to arrange. Mr. B., needed time to round up the guests.

STACY. And among them you have to find guess who?

LAURA. (*Enters from dining room carrying a colorful tablecloth and goes to windows.*) Pardon me. I'm just passin' through.

STACY. Like the face on that train.

LAURA. It's hot so how about eatin' on that there terrace?

STACY. Sounds great.

LAURA. I found this tablecloth. Kind of colorful. It will perk up the evenin'

GREG. It has perk enough already.

LAURA. (*As GERTA is heard moaning.*) There's somethin' out there.

MATT. (*Goes to L. of sofa.*) It's just a guest relaxing.

LAURA. But she's under a tree and she's moanin'. Is she sick?

MATT. Only if we're lucky.

STACY. I think she is chanting, Laura. It makes her feel good.

LAURA. Everyone to his own taste as the old lady said when she kissed the cow.

STACY. I'm going to stitch that into a sampler.

GREG. (*Rises.*) Laura, would you ask the young lady to step in here, please. I have an idea.

LAURA. If you want. I hope I can get through to her. (*Exits and yells.*) Hey, get yourself in here.

MATT. I think she got through.

STACY. (*TO GREG.*) You've thought of something clever, haven't you?

GREG. Possibly. No, probably.

MATT. What is it?

GREG. (*Goes L. as he thinks it out.*) How did this Gerta person suddenly appear? How did she know we would be here?

STACY. Or, more important, how did she know you would be here?

GREG. Precisely.

MATT. (*Goes to him.*) Mr. B. must have sent her.

STACY. But she has been coming into the office.

GREG. To set up an alibi for this trip?

STACY. Could be.

GREG. Then she is the hit man, I have won the bet. (*Starts U.C. below MATT.*) Let's go home.

MATT. Nonsense. You haven't proved it's her.

GERTA. (*Appears at windows with script in hand. LAURA is behind her.*) You have said, "The moment is now"? I wasn't sure you would know the proper time.

LAURA. (*Glances at her wristwatch as she crosses to dining room.*) The proper time is 8:32. My Timex is never wrong. (*Exits.*)

GREG. Before we start, let me ask you something.

GERTA. (*Marches to him obediently.*) Anything.

GREG. How did you know I was here in this place?

GERTA. I have a friend -

MATT. (*As he sits on the bench.*) I'm surprised.

GERTA. He is a magnificent poet as yet unrecognized.

MATT. He is ahead of his time?

GERTA. You know his work?

MATT. I was joking.

GERTA. (*Patronizingly.*) I should have known. Like me he has never been published so he is forced to work. He has a position with your answering service. He gave me the phone number and the rest was easy.

GREG. We are to assume you also have a friend with the telephone company?

GERTA. A fellow author who is translating life into the Dead Sea Scrolls.

STACY. Answer me one question.

GERTA. (*Moves to windows.*) The question, always the question. Everyone wants an answer to the question. (*Turns and holds her script aloft.*) The answer is in here.

STACY. Then you are not auditioning for anything, you are for real?

GERTA. I am what I am. And now I am outside. It is not right for me to read this now, Mr. Larson. The air is full of hostility.

GREG. Perhaps a bit later.

GERTA. I am patient. If the end comes before you read this, so be it. We never know when the end will be the beginning, do we? (*She smiles tolerantly.*) No, of course we don't. *(Exits.)*

STACY. (*Goes U.C. to GREG.*) Well, we have one suspect on either side of us. (*Gestures in both directions.*)

GREG. At least there's only two. Can't we tie them both up?

MATT. Maybe the real one hasn't gotten here yet. After all, Mr. B. hired some as cover-ups and some, I guess, are real.

STACY. Like Laura, the cook.

GREG. And the irrelevant one with the book must be genuine.

STACY. Let's not let anyone else in. You get those doors and I'll get the front door.

(GREG goes below sofa to the windows and STACY heads for the front door and bumps into BURTON FINLEY. He is a friendly soul of about middle age and is dressed in white overalls and carries a metal tool box. STACY gives a startled scream.)

BURTON. Plumber. Door was open.

MATT. (*Rises.*) We didn't call a plumber.

BURTON. Someone did. I was told what to do. (*Puts his hand into his inside pocket terrifying the others.*)

GREG. (*Takes a step in.*) Don't do that!

BURTON. What?

GREG. Keep your hands where we can see them

BURTON. I'm just showin' you my work order.

GREG. Slowly then.

BURTON. (*Slowly puts his hand inside and pulls out a work order.*) You must be city folks. (*Goes to GREG.*)

MATT. Yes, suspicious city folks.

BURTON. (*Shows him the order.*) See here. "Emergency. Check upstairs bathtub leak."

GREG. We just wanted to make sure.

BURTON. I know what I'm here to do. I'll show you. (*Puts tool box on sofa and unsnaps it.*)

STACY. (*Comes down.*) No! It's a gun!

GREG. (*At same time.*) Stop!

MATT. (*Ducks down by chair C..*) Everyone take cover.

BURTON. (*Pulls out a wrench.*) It's just my wrench.

GREG. Oh, your wrench.

MATT. (*Gets up.*) A wrench? Of course, what a nice wrench. A real beauty.

BURTON. It's just a plain wrench.

GREG. I guess the caretaker called you about the leak?

BURTON. Someone did. Don't know who. (*Snaps box shut.*) I'm surprised you city folks is so nervous. (*Goes to the foot of stairs.*) Ones come up here usually calm as cucumbers. You know what they say does it? Valium.

MATT. You go ahead and fix the leak.

BURTON. You may not have valium but you fellas sure have the prettiest woman.

STACY. Why, thank you.

BURTON. You married to one of them?

STACY. I'm just a secretary.

BURTON. (*With a wicked laugh.*) Oh, sure.

GREG. She is.

STACY. I am.

MATT. That's right.

BURTON. And this sure does look. like an office. Do I see a computer? A file cabinet? One of them fax machines? No, but what I do see is one damn pretty lady. Don't worry, we plumbers take an oath of silence like doctors and lawyers. (*Laughs.*) Secretary? That's what they all say. (*Goes upstairs.*)

STACY. My reputation is in tatters. I deserve a raise.

MATT. (*Sits on the bench.*) Don't you think it a little odd for a plumber to come out on a Saturday night just for a dripping faucet?

STACY. One wrench does not a plumber make.

GREG. I'm going to make a drink. Anyone else?

MATT. Me.

STACY. I'm abstaining but I'll get them for you jet-setters.

GREG. I'll do it. Yours are too weak. And this will give Matt a chance to have you alone for one minute. (*Goes D.L..*) Bar's through here?

STACY. Straight ahead. You can't miss it. (*He exits.*)

MATT. (*Goes to STACY.*) I have one minute alone with you. *(His arms go around her.)*

STACY. There is a killer here somewhere and you get romantic. James Bond you are not.

MATT. I have to make the most of whenever Greg lets you out of his sight.

STACY. (*Pats him and breaks away below desk.*) You do very well on all our dates.

MATT. But you spend most of the time talking about Greg.

STACY. I give you equal time when he takes me out.

MATT. You do like me better than you do him, don't you?

STACY. (*Raises her hand.*) I plead the fifth.

MATT. You'll have to make up your mind between us soon.

STACY. (*Leans back on sofa.*) Fight over me. I love it.

MATT. Do we have a duel at dawn?

STACY. Neither of you could even get up by dawn.

MATT. But we could stay up until then.

STACY. You are both incorrigible and I adore you both.

(PHONE rings.)

GREG. (*Comes in with two highballs.*) Get that, Stacy. (*Stacy goes L. of desk and picks up the phone.*) Here we are. (*Hands drink to MATT.*) Is it too weak?

STACY. (*Into phone.*) Hello ... just a minute, please -

MATT. (*During above.*) Probably, the way you mix them.

STACY. Matt, it's your answering service.

MATT. Take the message will you. (*To GREG.*) Too weak. (*Takes GREG'S glass and drinks .*)

STACY. (*During above, grabs pencil and pad from desk. Into phone.*) This is Mr. Stoddard's secretary. I'll take the message.

GREG. (*During above, to MATT.*) That is mine.

MATT. (*After drinking.*) Yes, this is better.

GREG. They're exactly the same.

STACY. (*Into phone.*) No ... no ... (*To MATT.*) Come here. (*Into phone.*) Would you repeat the message, please.

MATT. (*Takes phone from her and STACY goes to GREG.*) This is Mr. Stoddard.

STACY. Oh, Greg, we'll stop it. We won't let it happen.

GREG. What's going on?

STACY. I don't believe it.

GREG. Neither will I when I hear it. (*MATT hangs up phone in a stupor and looks at GREG.*) Speak.

MATT. The best laid plans and so forth.

GREG. Will someone tell me what it is.

MATT. (*Holds up phone pad on which STACY took down the message.*) I can't read shorthand.

STACY. (*Takes pad from him.*) Listen. "I was on car phone when accident occurred. Plans will proceed without a hitch. Everyone alerted. Have money ready." The caller left no name. (*Sits in chair C.*)

GREG. Not even a "you-know-who"?

LAURA. (*Enters from dining room with napkins and a bud vase with one flower in it .*) The face is passin' through again. Napkins. (*Holds them up.*) Pretty ain't they?

STACY. Very decorative.

LAURA. (*Heads for the windows going below GREG.*) And this flower for the centerpiece.

GREG. (*Goes to her.*) Laura, there is a plumber upstairs.

LAURA. Well, it ain't Corey.

MATT. Who is Corey?

GREG. Obviously the plumber, you idiot.

LAURA. Corey's home with the doc waitin' for Millie to give birth.

MATT. I hope it's a boy.

LAURA. I hope it's a cow. He's got enough bulls.

STACY. (*At foot of stairs.*) If Corey is home, than who is upstairs?

LAURA. Must be some new fella I don't know.

GREG. (*Skeptical.*) Uh-uh.

BURTON. (*Comes downstairs.*) Sorry to interrupt but I forgot somethin'. (*Goes out below STACY and out to front door.*)

LAURA. (*After watching him go.*) That the fella?

GREG. Yes.

LAURA. Don't look like no plumber to me. Clothes is too clean, but then maybe it's his first job.

STACY. You don't know him?

LAURA. Nope.

GREG. You're sure it's nope?

LAURA. Yep. (*Exits out windows.*)

GREG. (*Goes to closet.*) I am going to hide. (*Goes into it.*)

STACY. (*Goes U.C.*) Greg, you had better hide.

GREG. (*Goes by closet.*) I am not going to hide.

MATT. (*Crosses below STACY to closet and opens door.*) If he forgot something it might be his gun.

GREG. I am going to hide. (*Into closet and closes door.*)

MATT. (*Leans casually against the door.*) I hope he's safe in there.

STACY. Bullets can go through doors, you know.

MATT. Don't tell Greg that.

GREG. (*From inside closet.*) I heard.

BURTON. (*Comes in.*) I got it!

STACY. What?

BURTON. (*Holding up instruction book.*) My manual. That's a gosh-darn complicated faucet you got up there.

MATT. You worked around here long?

BURTON. (*Nervously.*) Not long.

MATT. How long?

BURTON. Oops, I hear that faucet leakin'. (*As he runs upstairs.*) Gotta save water these days.

STACY. (*By foot of stairs.*) Strange man. Cute though. I wonder if he's married?

MATT. I'm not married.

GREG. (*Comes out of closet.*) Neither am I.

STACY. (*Goes L. of desk.*) I have a smorgasbord of eligible men.

MATT. Shouldn't Laura and the plumber know each other if they're both local?

GREG. He's new and maybe she - (*Goes to desk..*) Let's look her up in the phone book.

STACY. (*Gets book from desk drawer and sits at desk.*) And I thought Matt was the idea man.

MATT. (*Goes to GREG.*) This evening is my idea. Isn't that enough?

GREG. You overdid it.

STACY. (*Having looked through book.*) ... nine, ten, eleven ...

GREG. What are you doing?

STACY. They must have founded the town.

LAURA. (*Enters from the terrace.*) I have done my best on short notice but that one under the tree asks for things out of season.

STACY. What things?

LAURA. Says she'll eat if I have bean sprouts. (*Moves C..*) Well, beans was planted in May and they're past sproutin'. Why eat a sprout anyway? I say, wait for the whole bean.

(DOORBELL RINGS, They all freeze and look at one another.)

LAURA. Ain't that the doorbell?
ALL THREE. Yes.
LAURA. Am I supposed to answer it?
STACY. (*To MATT.*) Is she?
MATT. (*To GREG.*) Is she?
GREG. (*To LAURA.*) Are you?
LAURA. It won't kill me. (*Goes to front door.*)
GREG. But it might kill me.
LILA. (*Off stage.*) Thank God someone's here.
LAURA. (*Of stage.*) Are you invited?

LILA.(Sails in and leans dramatically against the closet wall. LILA is beyond being an ingenue but doesn't realize it yet. She is very smartly dressed and speaks in a dramatic voice which demands the attention she wants.)

LILA. I am so embarrassed.
MATT. Why?
LILA. I'm having a problem with gas.
STACY. (*Taking an instant dislike to her .*) Personally?
LILA. (*Moves above chair C.*) No, dear, my car. How silly of me not to check my gauge before heading into this desolate countryside. (*LAURA moves in behind LILA.*)
GREG. We're soul-mates.
LAURA. You stayin' for food or not?
LILA. Well, I hardly think I -
MATT. You might as well.
LAURA. She will. (*Goes into dining room.*)

STACY. Can I call a gas station for you or perhaps you are AA?

LILA. Don't you mean AAA?

STACY. Oh, my mistake.

MATT. I have a full tank. Perhaps I can siphon some out for you.

LILA. Let's wait till after I have your generous snack. (*Sits making herself at home in the chair C.*) I am starved and I'm in no great rush.

STACY. So it seems.

LILA. I just had to get away from the city for a few days and there's this charming little inn upstate of here. The pressures, you know.

STACY. Pressures from what?

LILA. Oh. I assumed you recognized me.

STACY. Golly, no.

LILA. I'm an actress. I'm currently on a soap opera.

GREG. (*Looking at MATT.*) But he writes -

MATT. (*Drowning him out, goes to LILA.*) What an interesting life it must be.

LILA. Interesting, yes, and hard but so rewarding.

STACY. (*Goes to foot of stairs.*) I bet you'd like to wash up. (*With a smile .*) You look a fright.

LILA. (*Upset, she rises.*) Do I?

STACY. Let me show you the little girls' room.

LILA, (*Goes to STACY.*) How sweet of you. (*To others.*) Oh, I am Lila Langforth. Perhaps the name - ?

STACY. And I am Stacy Kingsley. Perhaps the name - ? (*A pause while the men exchange a smile and LILA shakes her head.*) I am secretary to Gregory Larson over there.

GREG. Hello.

STACY. And this is a friend, Matthew Stoddard.

MATT. How do.

LILA. A pleasure.

STACY. Come along. (*LILA goes upstairs first.*) You'll run into a plumber and I'm sure he will recognize you. (*They are off.*)

MATT. (*Laughs and sits in chair C.*) Don't you love it when women hate each other on sight?

GREG. (*Crosses to stairs and looks up them.*) She's no soap actress. Your name didn't ring a bell. She didn't ask for a job.

MATT. That out of gas bit went out years ago.

GREG. (*Goes above sofa.*) Stacy said you used it last weekend driving back from the tennis in Forest Hills.

MATT. Just a joke.

GREG. (*Goes to windows.*) Didn't get away with it, did you?

MATT. No more than you did with that "the elevator in my building is broken so perhaps I can stay at your place" routine.

GREG. It did break Tuesday.

MATT. That was Wednesday.

GREG. Don't quibble.

HENRIETTA. (*There is a moan from outside and then she speaks .*) Yoo-hoo. Hello there.

MATT. Now who?

HENRIETTA. (*Off stage.*) Excuse me, little girl, do you live here?

GERTA. (*Off stage.*) I live in the world.

HENRIETTA. (*Off stage.*) How nice.

MATT. You better see who it is. (*DOORBELL rings.*)

GREG. Who's that?

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